

## **Two Sabbath Stories in Walter Benjamin's Kafka Essay: Wishing on a Constellation of Three Stars**

Freddie Rokem

freddie.rokem@gmail.com

This essay examines the two stories about or related to the Sabbath which Walter Benjamin included in his essay commemorating the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death. Both are pastiches of Hasidic stories, apparently written by Benjamin himself. The first is based on a legend about a princess who prepares a festive meal for her fiancé on Friday evening, as the Sabbath begins; and the second is about the Jews in a Hasidic village who have assembled on Saturday evening, as the Sabbath is about to end, telling their wishes to each other. These stories, the essay suggests, are not only important for assessing Benjamin's reading of Kafka's *oeuvre*, but must at the same time also be seen as an expression of Benjamin's own, gradually developing understanding of the Messianic dimensions of his own philosophy of history.

Keywords: Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, Sabbath, Philosophy of history

## Two Sabbath Stories in Walter Benjamin's Kafka Essay: Wishing on a Constellation of Three Stars

Freddie Rokem  
freddie.rokem@gmail.com

Ideas are to things as constellations to stars.  
*Origin of the German Trauerspiel*<sup>1</sup>

As long as there is still one beggar around, there will be myth.  
*The Arcades Project*<sup>2</sup>

Reversal is the direction of study which transforms existence into script.  
"Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death"<sup>3</sup>

In his foundational essay commemorating the tenth anniversary of Kafka's death, Walter Benjamin included two stories about or related to the Sabbath. They are both pastiches of Hasidic stories; based on the story-telling traditions of the 18th Century spiritual revival movement of orthodox Jews in Eastern Europe – founded by Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer – characterised by their strong belief in the imminent arrival of the Messiah<sup>4</sup>. These two stories are not by Kafka, nor – as far as I have been able to find out – can they be found in

---

<sup>1</sup> W. Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, transl. by H. Eiland, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2019, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Id., *The Arcades Project*, transl. by H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1999, p. 400 (K6 4).

<sup>3</sup> Id., *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, in Id., *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2 (1927-1934), transl. by H. Zohn, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 1999, p. 815.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer was called *Baal Shem Tov*, which means "The one with the good name/reputation".

the rich, existing story-telling repertoire of Hasidic movement<sup>5</sup>. Instead, as I want to suggest here, they were most likely composed by Benjamin himself, maybe in collaboration with his close friend, the Kabbala scholar Gershon Scholem. And, furthermore, these two stories are not only important for assessing Benjamin's reading of Kafka's *oeuvre*, but must at the same time also be seen as an expression of Benjamin's own, gradually developing understanding of the Messianic dimensions of his own philosophy of history.

The first story is about a rabbi who explains that the Jewish custom of greeting the Sabbath with a festive meal on Friday evening is based on a legend about a princess living in exile in a village whose language she does not understand. After receiving a letter from her fiancé that he will arrive on the Eve of the Sabbath she expresses her joy by preparing a meal for him, because as the rabbi explains her fiancé is the Messiah. The second story describes how the Jews who have gathered in the shabby inn of a Hasidic village, waiting for the end of the Sabbath on Saturday evening – as a constellation of three stars in close proximity to each other can be seen in the sky – decide to share their wishes with each other. A beggar, sitting in a dark corner of the inn is the last to tell his gradually unfolding wish, beginning by saying that «I wish I were a powerful king reigning over a big country»<sup>6</sup> who flees when his castle is invaded by an enemy, finally ending up on the bench where the beggar is actually sitting when telling this wish.

Benjamin mobilizes the two stories referring to the beginning and conclusion of the Sabbath – the day of rest prescribed in the book of *Exodus* (20; 8-11), reminding us that after completing the creation in six days God had rested on the seventh, making it holy – in order to invite the readers of the essay to enter into what Benjamin explicitly terms Kafka's "world" or his "household". These stories are among the many "keys" Benjamin offers in his essay to provide an access to the enigmatic *oeuvre* of Kafka, who himself, as Benjamin emphasizes, «took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings».

---

<sup>5</sup> For two recent contributions on their story telling or tales about them, see U. Gellman, *Stories*, in M. Wodzinski (ed.), *Studying Hasidism: Sources, Methods, Perspectives*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick (N.J.) 2019, pp. 60-74 and G. Hasan-Rokem, S. Magid, *Folk Narratives* in M. Wodzinski (ed.), *Studying Hasidism: Sources, Methods, Perspectives*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick (N.J.) 2019, pp. 127-143.

<sup>6</sup> W. Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, cit., p. 812.

Thus, according to Benjamin, «/o/ne has to find one's way in them circumspectly, cautiously, and warily», adding that, «the directive in which Kafka ordered the destruction of his literary remains is just as unfathomable, to be weighed just as carefully as the answers of the gatekeeper (*Türhüter*) in “Before the Law” (*Vor dem Gesetz*)»<sup>7</sup>, who does not allow the man from the country to enter the law.

However, with the two stories about the Sabbath in particular, but also through other anecdotes and allusions, Benjamin positions himself in the essay as a benevolent “gatekeeper”, inviting the reader to enter the supposedly impenetrable and inaccessible enigmas of/in Kafka's writing. These enigmas are in particular displayed in the essay itself through what Benjamin terms the “cloudy spot” in the “interior”<sup>8</sup> of the well-known parable “Before the Law”; about the man from the country who wants to enter the law but is not let in by the gatekeeper. Finally – just before the man from the country is about to die – the gatekeeper explains that the reason why no one else has asked to be let in through the gate of the law during all the years, is that this particular gate was made exclusively for him, the man from the country. Therefore, the gatekeeper concludes: «I am now going to shut/close it (*Ich gehe jetzt und schließe ihn*)»<sup>9</sup>.

“Before the Law” is a part of Kafka's novel *The Trial*, where it is interpreted by the priest. This, Benjamin remarks, may give us the impression that «the novel were nothing but the unfolding of the parable», immediately clarifying that «the word “unfolding” itself has a double meaning (*Das Wort ‘entfaltet’ ist aber doppelsinnig*)»<sup>10</sup>. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding a paper unfolds into a

---

<sup>7</sup> *Ivi*, p. 804, slightly adjusted.

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi*, p. 802.

<sup>9</sup> I want to thank Ira Avneri for pointing out to me that ‘to close’, *schliessen*, and key, *schlüssel*, have the same etymological root as *Schloss*, castle, which in Kafka's eponymous novel is forever inaccessible, just as the Law in the parable. See also my article *Before the Hebrew Notebook: Kafka's Words and Gestures in Translation*, [in A. Eshel, R. Selig (ed. by), *The German-Hebrew Dialogue: Studies of Encounter and Exchange*, De Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2018, pp. 177-195] analyzing the Israeli theatre performance, by the Ruth Kanner Theatre, based on Franz Kafka's notebook for studying Hebrew kept in The National Library of Israel, called *The Hebrew Notebook – And Other Stories by Franz Kafka* from 2013. This performance develops Benjamin's gesture of the benevolent gatekeeper, by enabling the spectators of the performance to enter the “law”, represented by Kafka's study of Hebrew, the language of *the Law*.

<sup>10</sup> The notion of *Entfaltung/entfalten* is an important component of Benjamin's critical method which I will not be able to discuss here.

flat sheet of paper. This second kind of ‘unfolding’ is really appropriate to parable; the reader takes pleasure in smoothing it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand»<sup>11</sup>. Even if the “appropriate” way to read a parable is in the second sense – like a soothsayer reading someone’s open palm – Benjamin claims that «Kafka’s parables unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom»<sup>12</sup>.

But this form of unfolding, just as the second option, Benjamin immediately adds, means that they are read as literature, belonging to the tradition of Western prose forms, while in fact «they have, rather, a relationship to religious teachings similar to the one Haggadah has to Halachah. They are not parables, yet they do not want to be taken at their face value; they lend themselves to quotation and can be recounted for purposes of clarification»<sup>13</sup>. Without discussing exactly how to apply Benjamin’s distinction between Haggadah (story-telling) and Halachah (law) here, reciprocally serving as a “model *for*” and a “model *of*” a teleological and a theological scenario – the temporal development of the story and the belief system of Halachah – which Benjamin collocates in his philosophy of history. This was an issue which Benjamin also discussed in his correspondence with Gershom Scholem as he was editing his essay before it was printed<sup>14</sup>. In what follows I want to draw attention how the stories about the Sabbath serve as keys for unfolding the Messianic dimensions of this “religious teaching”, specifically in connection with the notion of the “wish”<sup>15</sup>.

But before discussing the two Sabbath stories more in detail, I want to briefly mention some of the additional keys Benjamin introduces for entering the world of Kafka’s texts. The anecdote opening Benjamin’s essay – based on a story by Alexander Pushkin – about the “unimportant little clerk named Shuvalkin” who supposedly gets Potemkin, who has refused to cooperate with the bureaucrats, to sign all the important documents, but in fact

---

<sup>11</sup> W. Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, cit., p. 802.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ivi*, p. 803.

<sup>14</sup> See below note 18.

<sup>15</sup> See V. Liska, *Benjamin and Agamben on Kafka, Judaism and the Law*, expanded version of “*Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper comes a man...*”: *Kafka, Narrative, and the Law*, in “*Naharaim*”, 6/2, 2013, pp. 175-94; posted on Academia.edu:

[https://www.academia.edu/29020766/Benjamin\\_and\\_Agamben\\_on\\_Kafka\\_Judaism\\_and\\_the\\_Law](https://www.academia.edu/29020766/Benjamin_and_Agamben_on_Kafka_Judaism_and_the_Law)

signs them with Shuvalkin's own name, is according to Benjamin «like a herald of Kafka's work, storming two hundred years ahead of it. The enigma which beclouds this story is Kafka's enigma»<sup>16</sup>. The Shuvalkin-story, which thus also contains a cloudy spot, does however not explain exactly what this enigma is, but provides another one, which as Benjamin implies, is *like* Kafka's enigma.

Another option Benjamin proposes for a deepened understanding of Kafka's texts is to treat them as scores for theatrical, performative improvisations and explorations based on the procedures of the "Nature Theatre of Oklahoma" in Kafka's novel *The Man who Disappeared (Amerika)*. This can, as Benjamin explains «dissolve events into their gestural components», adding that

Only then will one come to the certain realization that Kafka's entire work constitutes a code of gestures which surely had no definite symbolic meaning for the author from the outset; rather, the author tried to derive such a meaning from them in ever-changing contexts and experimental groupings. The theater is the logical place for such groupings<sup>17</sup>.

This is perhaps a trial-and-error procedure, hoping to «catch hold of the lost *gestus* the way Peter Schlemihl caught hold of the shadow he had sold»<sup>18</sup>. Benjamin also suggests that the paintings of El Greco have a theatrical dimension and can be seen as scenographic backdrops for Kafka's stories, because «like El Greco, Kafka tears open the sky behind every gesture; but as with El Greco – who was the patron saint of the Expressionists – the gesture remains the decisive thing, the center of the event»<sup>19</sup>. Exactly how Benjamin's writing brings together the interruptive qualities of El Greco's dynamic representations of the interactions between cloud and shadow, the development of photography, and Brecht's epic theatre and the *gestus* with the theatricality in Kafka's texts is beyond the scope of this essay<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>16</sup> W. Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, cit., pp. 794-795.

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 804.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, p. 814.

<sup>19</sup> *Ivi*, p. 802.

<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the description of Kafka's childhood photograph, opening another section of the essay, which Benjamin also included through literary montage techniques to depict himself, has to be discussed more in

However, among the many methods and materials Benjamin mobilized in his essay to unfold the enigmatic secrets of Kafka's writing, the two stories framing the Sabbath are of special interest, as they explore the Messianic hope for redemption. This is an important and often discussed aspect of Benjamin's gradually developing philosophy of history, beginning already in his 1921 essay *On the Task of the Translator*<sup>21</sup>, finally providing his formulation concerning a "weak messianic power" in the second thesis of *On the Concept of History*:

The past carries with it a *secret* index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now *silent* ones? Don't the women we court have sisters they *no longer recognize*? If so, then there is a *secret* agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim can not be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this<sup>22</sup>.

Therefore, as I want to suggest here, the two stories about the Sabbath do not only enable us to enter Kafka's world/household, with Benjamin as the benevolent gatekeeper, but can also illuminate certain aspects of Benjamin's own thinking about the redemptive potentials in history, which as Benjamin's language reveals, is shrouded in secrets.

---

detail in another context. When writing the Kafka essay Benjamin had already integrated his description of the Kafka's photograph in the first version of "The Mummerehlen" passage of *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, written 1932-1934. Describing his own experience being photographed with «a crudely painted prospect of the Alps, and my right hand, which had to brandish a kidskin hat, cast its shadow on the clouds and snowfields of the backdrop» [W. Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, in Id., *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 (1935-1938), ed. by H. Eiland, M.W. Jennings, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2006, p. 392]. And then, with a literary montage technique Benjamin almost invisibly glides into the description of the Kafka photograph in the next sentence: «But the tortured smile on the lips of the little mountaineer is not as disturbing as the look I take in now from the child's face, which lies in the shadow of a potted palm. The latter comes from one of those studios which – with their footstools and tripods, tapes tries and easels – put you in mind of both a boudoir and a torture chamber. I am standing there bareheaded, my left hand holding a giant sombrero which I dangle with studied grace» (*ibid.*). See L. Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1997.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g., G. Agamben, *Language and History in Benjamin*, in "Differenzia: Review of Italian Thought", n. 2, 1988, pp. 169-183.

<sup>22</sup> W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, in Id., *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4 (1938-1940), transl. by H. Zohn, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2006, p. 390 (emphasis mine, F.R.)

In the Kafka essay, Benjamin quotes a conversation between Kafka and his close friend Max Brod, which Brod had published in his Kafka biography:

“We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts, that come into God’s head”, Kafka said. This reminded me [i.e., Brod] at first of the Gnostic view of life: God as the evil demiurge, the world as his Fall.

“Oh no”, said Kafka, “our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his”.

“Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know”.

He smiled. “Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us”.<sup>23</sup>

The two Sabbath stories can be seen as the beginning of Benjamin’s response to Kafka’s collective self-exclusion, culminating in the Second Thesis, quoted above. Besides expressing the wish/hope for the coming of a Messiah, directing our attention towards the future, the two stories about the Sabbath also problematize the notion of origin (*Ursprung*), which is of central importance for Benjamin’s critical method, most prominently explored in his *Trauerspiel* book (*Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1928). In the story about the beginning of the Sabbath on Friday evening, Benjamin twice mistakenly notes that it is a Talmudic story, while in fact, as Galili Shahar has pointed out, is directly related to the story-telling traditions of the Hasidim<sup>24</sup>. I am not able to determine what Benjamin’s intention for this “mistake” is (if there is an intention); the following exchange with his close friend Gershom Scholem points towards a possible “solution”.

After reading the not yet published Kafka-essay, Scholem asked Benjamin – in a letter from July 9, 1934 – about Benjamin’s source for the two stories about the Sabbath in his essay, referring to the fact that they had already appeared, but told quite differently, in Ernst Bloch’s book *Traces (Spuren)*. This collection of stories, referring to the symptoms of something that can not be seen directly – the traces – had been published in 1930, a few years before Benjamin wrote the Kafka-essay, in 1934:

---

<sup>23</sup> W. Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, cit., p. 798.

<sup>24</sup> Galili Shahar (see in particular the article *Kafka’s Messages*, in “Performance Research”, 26/5, 2022, pp. 34-38) has shown that this story can be read in conjunction with specific Hasidic tales, but not in the exact version of Benjamin. It is clear however that it is not a Talmudic tale as Benjamin indicates. See also, H. Sussman, *The Herald: A Reading of Walter Benjamin’s Kafka Study*, in “Diacritics”, 7/1, 1977, pp. 42-54.



Who is actually the source of all those stories? Does Ernst Bloch have them from you or you from him? The great rabbi with the profound dictum on the messianic kingdom who appears in Bloch is none other than I myself; what a way to achieve fame!! It was one of my first ideas about the Kabbalah<sup>25</sup>.

Benjamin responds (in a letter from July 20, 1934) that «the origin of the stories in “Kafka” remains my secret – one you would only succeed in unravelling by being present in person, in which case I could promise a whole series of even more exquisite ones» (450). I have not been able to find any sign that this conversation actually took place, but it is important to pay attention to the atmosphere of secrecy and mystification surrounding the origin of these stories.

Benjamin tells the story about the beginning of the Sabbath in order to draw attention to the allegorical significance of the village in Kafka's novel *The Castle*, as he is critical of Brod's biographical interpretation, referring to the village of Zürau where Kafka stayed with his sister after being diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1917. Instead, Benjamin provides a story about a princess who lives in a village whose language she does not understand, perhaps indirectly also referring to the first readers of Kafka's texts, who were incapable of deciphering its enigmatic codes. Thus, by a self-reflexive hermeneutic gesture, Benjamin's story may, like the letter the princess receives announcing the expected arrival of her fiancé, explain the significance of the village in *The Castle*, as a site where even the Messiah can appear:

It is the village in a Talmudic legend told by a rabbi in answer to the question why Jews prepare a festive evening meal on Fridays. The legend is about a princess languishing in exile, in a village whose language she does not understand, far from her compatriots. One day this princess receives a letter saying that her fiancé has not forgotten her and is on his way to her. —The fiancé, so says the rabbi, is the Messiah; the princess is the soul; the village in which she

---

<sup>25</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. by G. Scholem, T. Adorno, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, p. 446. See also the letter from Scholem to Benjamin from July 17, 1934, in Id., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem*, ed. by G. Scholem, Schocken Books, New York 1989, pp. 126-127.

lives in exile is the body. She prepares a meal for him because this is the only way in which she can express her joy in a village whose language she does not know<sup>26</sup>.

According to Benjamin, the rabbi supposedly solves the allegorical puzzle by personifying the village as the body to which the soul of the princess has been exiled to a life of total estrangement from her surroundings. The meal she cooks for the Sabbath expresses the joy she feels—and here Benjamin repeats that she lives in «a village whose language she does not know» – at the coming of Messiah, who is her fiancé. And Benjamin concludes, that «this village of the Talmud is right in Kafka’s world»<sup>27</sup>.

According to Benjamin the second Sabbath story in his Kafka-essay which opens the final section titled *Sancho Panza*, also «takes us deep into the household that is Kafka’s world»<sup>28</sup>. It serves as an introduction to Kafka’s short story *The Next Village*, about the rider whose grandfather tells him that he will never reach the next village, because life itself is too short for such a journey, alluding dialectically to the Friday night story, about the letter announcing the expected arrival of the Messiah to the village where the princess lives. The Saturday night story, on the other hand, takes us to the “household” of a story about the impossibility of the rider to reach the desired destination of the next village, because life is too short. But here the wish which the beggar tells the villagers, to have been a powerful king who succeeded to escape when his castle was invaded by the enemy, finally reaching the bench in the corner of the shabby inn in the Hasidic village, describes a journey where at least a temporary goal has been reached. There is however no guarantee that he has reached his final destination – the “next” village – when he tells his story about his escape from the enemy:

In a Hasidic village, so the story goes, Jews were sitting together in a shabby inn one Sabbath evening [*Sabbath-Ausgang* in the original]. They were all local people, with the exception of

---

<sup>26</sup> W. Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, cit., p. 805.

<sup>27</sup> W. Benjamin, *Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death*, cit., pp. 805-807. In a radio-talk Benjamin gave in 1931, *Franz Kafka: Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer* Benjamin presents the same story, saying that, «it needs only a minute shift of emphasis in this story from the Talmud for us to find ourselves in Kafka’s world». In Id., *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, cit., p. 497.

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, p. 812.

one person no one knew, a very poor, ragged man who was squatting in a dark corner at the back of the room. All sorts of things were discussed, and then it was suggested that everyone should tell what wish he would make if one were granted him. One man wanted money; another wished for a son-in-law; a third dreamed of a new carpenter's bench; and so each spoke in turn. After they had finished, only the beggar in his dark corner was left. Reluctantly and hesitantly he answered the question. "I wish I were a powerful king reigning over a big country. Then, some night while I was asleep in my palace, an enemy would invade my country, and by dawn his horsemen would penetrate to my castle and meet with no resistance. Roused from my sleep, I wouldn't have time even to dress and I would have to flee in my shirt. Rushing over hill and dale and through forests day and night, I would finally arrive safely right here at the bench in this corner. This is my wish". The others exchanged uncomprehending glances. "And what good would this wish have done you?" someone asked. "I'd have a shirt", was the answer<sup>29</sup>.

Immediately after telling this story, Benjamin adds that it takes us deep into the household which is Kafka's world, adding that «No one says that the distortions which it will be the Messiah's mission to set right someday affect only our space; surely they are distortions of our time as well»<sup>30</sup>.

Following Benjamin's remark about the distortions of "our time", I want to suggest that the two Sabbath stories do not only take us into Kafka's domestic world – with the kitchen where the languishing princess can prepare the meal for the arrival of Messiah; or the inn where the traditional "Third Meal" of the Sabbath had no doubt already been served when it was decided that everyone will tell what wish they would make if one were granted them. The stories also take us into Benjamin's conceptual dwelling; unfolding his dialectical method of developing rhetorical figures and literary tropes of this redeeming imaginary. This is expressed by the wish of the beggar, telling the villagers the story of his own *Ursprung*, with his own 'initial leap', the *UR-SPRUNG* from his bed setting out on the journey of escape from his enemies, exiled from his castle. In opposition to the conventional wishes of the three villagers, with one wanting money, while «another wished for a son-in-law [and] a third dreamed of a new carpenter's bench», which refer to

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

something they want to happen in the future, the wish of the beggar is retrospective, wishing for a past which has already happened, reconstructing this past to explain why he has arrived at the inn.

The wishes of the three villagers conform to the traditional structure of a wish (or wishing) as a performative use of language referring to a future event, usually without specifying exactly when (and even if) the wish will come true. like praying or “wishing” or “hoping” for the Messiah to come, or like wishing something on a falling star. A wish is a private “speech-act”, a thought which by doing things with words said to oneself do not, at least not to begin with, establish an inter-personal or social context. The wish can of course become public, as in Benjamin’s story, with the villagers and the beggar telling their wishes. A promise or a threat, on the other hand – which also refer to the future – imply that someone has made a commitment to another person, generally, but not necessarily specifying, more or less, when or under which conditions or circumstances, it will come into effect. Instead, a wish is a projection of a desire to have, to do or to experience something in an unspecified future. It is of course also possible to share a wish with another person, though this does not seem to be a necessary condition for the wish to have the illocutionary force which Austin stipulates for a speech act, the context in which the speech-act is uttered where certain conditions of being appropriate are fulfilled<sup>31</sup>.

When all the local villagers who were interested in telling their wish are done, «only the beggar in his dark corner was left» who «/r/eluctantly and hesitantly ... answered the question». He presents the fourth wish in the story, which consists of many “sub-wishes”, beginning by saying “*Ich wollte, ich wäre ein großmächtiger König und herrschte in einem weiten Lande*”; translated “I wish I were a powerful king reigning over a big country.” Compared to the villagers this is supposedly a serious wish, which however is gradually transformed into something even more trivial than their wishes: a shirt. The beggar’s wish is based on a gradually developing chain of conditions about his past, beginning the first condition being met from which the chain of conditions develops, finally reaching the conclusion of the “here and now”, pointing at the bench on which he actually is sitting as

---

<sup>31</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962.  
210

the final realization of his wish. The beggar's wish to arrive safely on this bench, where he will tell his story, has been fulfilled by his presence and by the story itself.

A page later Benjamin interprets his own tale about the wish of the beggar, creating a textual montage of himself and Kafka's short parables *Wunsch, Indianer zu werden* as well as *Das nächste Dorf*<sup>32</sup>. Here we can see that the story about the beggar also alludes to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a play where Benjamin in Prospero found both himself and his library with books filled with magic as well as a king who has been usurped, while already alluding to what will become Benjamin's text on *Angelus Novus* and the angel of history:

He [Kafka] might understand himself, but what an enormous effort would be required! It is a tempest [*Sturm*] that blows from forgetting, and study is a cavalry attack against it. Thus, the beggar on the corner bench rides toward his past in order to catch hold of himself in the figure of the fleeing king. This ride, which is long enough for a life, corresponds to life, which is too short for a ride – «until one shed one's spurs (for there were no spurs), threw away the reins (for there were no reins), and barely saw the land before one as a smoothly mown plain, with the horse's neck and head already gone». This is the fulfillment of the fantasy about the blessed horseman who rushes toward the past on an untrammelled, happy journey, no longer a burden on his galloping horse. But accursed is the rider who is chained to his nag /.../ (914-815)

And from there Benjamin goes on quoting Kafka's short parable *The Wish to be a Red Indian (Wunsch, Indianer zu werden)*:

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone<sup>33</sup>.

The Red Indian, like the beggar, is finally footed.

---

<sup>32</sup> Like with Kafka's photograph mentioned in note 7.

<sup>33</sup> <https://commapress.co.uk/resources/online-short-stories/the-wish-to-be-an-indian-franz-kafka/>

And in a short text published under the pseudonym Detlef Holz in *Die Literarische Welt*, in November 1933, Benjamin writes:

The good writer says no more than he thinks. And much depends on that. For speech is not simply the expression but also the making real of thought. In the same way that running is not just the expression of the desire [wish] to reach a goal, but also the realization of that goal. (*So ist das Gehen nicht nur der Ausdruck des Wunsches, ein Ziel zu erreichen, sondern seine Realisierung*)<sup>34</sup>.

And, finally, in his Baudelaire essay, written in 1939 and published in January 1940, Benjamin reflected that,

If we look at gambling from the psychological as well as the technical point of view, Baudelaire's conception of it appears even more significant. It is obvious that the gambler is out to win. Yet his desire to win and make money cannot really be termed a "wish" in the strict sense of the word (*Doch wird man sein Bestreben, zu gewinnen und Geld zu machen, nicht einen Wunsch im eigentlichen Sinne des Wortes nennen wollen*). He may be inwardly motivated by greed or by some sinister design. At any rate, his frame of mind is such that he cannot make much use of experience. A wish, however, appertains to an order of experience (*Der Wunsch seinerseits gehört dagegen den Ordnungen der Erfahrung an*). «What one wishes for in one's youth, one has in abundance in old age», said Goethe. The earlier in life one makes a wish, the greater one's chances that it will be fulfilled. The further a wish reaches out in time, the greater the hopes for its fulfillment (*Je früher im Leben man einen Wunsch tut, desto größere Aussicht hat er, erfüllt zu werden. Je weiter ein Wunsch in die Ferne der Zeit ausgreift, desto mehr läßt sich für seine Erfüllung hoffen*). But it is experience that accompanies one to the far reaches of time, that fills and articulates time. Thus, a wish fulfilled is the crowning of experience (*Was aber in die Ferne der Zeit zurückgeleitet, ist die Erfahrung, die sie erfüllt und gliedert. Darum ist der erfüllte Wunsch die Krone, welche der Erfahrung beschieden ist*). In folk symbolism, distance in space can take the place of distance in time; that is why the shooting star, which plunges into infinite space, has become the symbol of a fulfilled wish (*In der Symbolik der Völker kann die Ferne des Raumes für die Ferne der Zeiten eintreten; daher die Sternschnuppe, welche in die unendliche Ferne des Raumes stürzt, zum*

---

<sup>34</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Good Writer*, in Id., *Selected Writings*, Vol. 2, cit., p. 723.  
212

*Symbol des erfüllten Wunsches geworden ist*). The ivory ball that rolls into the next compartment, the next card that lies on top, are the very antithesis of a falling star<sup>35</sup>.

---

<sup>35</sup> Id., *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, transl. by H. Zohn, in Id. *Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, cit., p. 331; German original in Id. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. I, pp. 634-635.